



Principles, Policies, and Procedures: Domestic Geographic Names

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Domestic Geographic Names

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

It would be ideal if in everyday language all people were to use but one name for a given geographic entity with only one entity known by that name. In practice, the extent to which this ideal can be reached varies with time according to sociopolitical conditions, the mobility of people and their naming habits, and language flexibility. Confusion, uncertainty, and misunderstanding may occur when the name for an entity is spelled in different ways, when different names are used for the same place, when the same name is used for different places, or when a name is applied to a feature in an unexpected or different way from the general understanding of how it should apply. Standardization of the written form of a name and its application has become increasingly important during the last 100 years because of reference needs associated with the development of natural sciences; sophisticated transportation and communication systems; special land, mineral, and water rights; and highly accurate large-scale maps and charts.

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U.S. BOARD ON GEOGRAPHIC NAMES

The systematic standardization of geographic names in the United States began late in the 19th century. After the American Civil War there was a surge of mapping and scientific reporting associated with the exploration, mining, and settlement of the western territories. Inconsistencies and contradictions among the many names, their spellings, and applications became a serious problem to mapmakers and scientists who required uniform, nonconflicting geographic nomenclature. As a result, President Benjamin Harrison signed an Executive Order on September 4, 1890, establishing the United States Board on Geographic Names. The Board was given authority to resolve all unsettled questions concerning geographic names. Decisions of the Board were accepted as binding by all departments and agencies of the Federal Government.

In 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt extended the responsibilities of the Board. In addition to adjudicating conflicts, it now had authority to standardize all geographic names for Federal use, including name changes and new names.

The current period in the Board's history began in 1947 when the Congress of the United States

reorganized the Board by Public Law 80-242 (see [Appendix A](#)). The Board on Geographic Names, conjointly with the Secretary of the Interior, is directed to establish and maintain uniform geographic name usage throughout the Federal Government. The present Board operates without a budget and is made up of members and deputies from Federal departments and independent agencies, providing a broad spectrum of representation from most Federal programs concerned with the use of geographic names. All members of the Board and their deputies are employees of the Federal Government, and they serve without further compensation. Members and deputies are appointed by the heads of their respective departments or agencies for a 2-year term.

The Chairman is appointed by the Secretary of the Interior on nomination by the Board. The officers of the Board are its Chairman, Vice Chairman, and Executive Secretaries. The Chairman appoints either the Executive Secretary for Domestic Names or the Executive Secretary for Foreign Names to be the Executive Secretary to the Board.

Special working committees are established by the Board as necessary. The Secretary of the Interior, upon recommendation of the Board, may establish advisory committees of recognized experts in their respective fields to assist in the solution or treatment of special problems. Current working committees include the Domestic Names Committee, Foreign Names Committee, Executive Committee, Publications and Publicity Committee, and advisory committees for Antarctic and undersea feature names.

Since 1947, domestic names standardization has been carried out in the name of the Board by its Domestic Names Committee, which meets monthly. Consisting of members and deputies representing the Departments of the Interior, Commerce, and Agriculture and the Government Printing Office, Postal Service, and Library of Congress, it is responsible for standardizing the names of places, features, and areas within the 50 States and in other areas under the sovereignty of the United States. The Executive Secretary and staff support for the domestic names activities of the Board and names activities for Antarctica are provided by the U.S. Geological Survey, an agency in the Department of the Interior.

From the beginning, in 1890, the Board developed principles of domestic names standardization that have stood the test of time. A primary principle is formal recognition of present-day local usage. To this end, the Committee and its supporting staff work closely with State geographic names authorities, State and local governments, and the general public in order to determine the choice, spelling, written form, and application of each name for official use. A list of State names authorities can be found in *Authorities and Organizations Involved With Geographic Names: United States, Canada, Mexico - 1989*, published by the U.S. Geological Survey in cooperation with the Board on Geographic Names. See [Appendix B](#) for a list of terms and their definitions used by the Board in its standardization program.

Members of the Board and of its staff also have represented the United States in various

international programs to standardize names. [Appendix E](#) gives a brief history of international programs, including those in the United Nations.

Foreign names standardization is carried out in the name of the Board by its Foreign Names Committee. The Committee's members and deputies represent those Federal departments and independent agencies concerned with the use of foreign geographic names. The Executive Secretary and staff support for the foreign names activities of the Board and the maintenance of records relating to names of undersea features are provided by the National Imagery and Mapping Agency in the Department of Defense (see [Appendix D](#)).

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CHARACTERISTICS OF DOMESTIC GEOGRAPHIC NAMES

Geographic names normally originate in and are influenced by spoken language. It is important to remember this fact because many people are concerned with written forms of names, including matters of spelling, capitalization, word form, and writing marks, that may have little to do with the way names are spoken.

Most geographic names are binomial in that they have two parts, denoting the specific and the generic: Middleton (middle town), Coal Hollow, or Sierra Nevada. The generic part tells the kind of place, feature, or area to which the name refers, and the specific part uniquely identifies the particular place, feature, or area. The generic part of the name is usually a single topographic term such as brook, hill, bay, peak, mesa, or lake; the specific part may consist of one or more words such as Grosse Roche, Jenny Lind, and Casale Campo di Carne. The binomial (two-part) form is strong, and in written usage often leads to combining words in the specific part of the name, such as Threemile Run and Redhill Gulch. The names of some features can be long, especially if that specific part is a prepositional phrase: Cliffs of the Seven Double Pillars, Foot of the Mountains Run, and Canon del Rajadero de los Negros.

Some names have nonce (rare) generic forms; consider, for example, colorful American names such as Bald Alley (ridge), Butlers Toothpick (pinnacle rock), Titans Piazza (hill), and Devils Racepath (ridge). Among variations of the binomial form are one-word names that require a capitalized article: The Bend, La Pica, The Cape, The Nose, and The Maze.

Single-word specific names such as Boston and Pinhook are common for populated places and some civil divisions; the kind of feature meant is implied by sentence context.

Several names with the same generic word may be treated as a group in text with the generic word in plural form: "Calumet, Manitowoc, and Sheboygan Counties"; "Wisconsin and Illinois Rivers."

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NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC NAMES DATABASE

The National Geographic Names Database is a part of the [Geographic Names Information System](#) (GNIS) and represents the primary source for identifying official names. The system is maintained by the U.S. Geological Survey in cooperation with the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. Over 2.5 million name records are currently in the database. These records include the names of natural features, populated places, civil divisions, areas and regions, and cultural features such as mines, churches, schools, cemeteries, hospitals, dams, airports, and shopping centers. All names in the database, except for variant names, are considered official for Federal use, by either Board policy or decision or under the procedures of the organization responsible for its administrative names. Information associated with each record includes the following:

- written form of the official or primary name
- term identifying the kind of feature
- location and, in some cases, extent of the feature by geographic coordinates
- U.S. Geological Survey or other official base series map on which the feature can be located
- elevation of the feature when appropriate
- variant names and spellings for the same feature

Information in the database can be retrieved, analyzed, and organized to meet general and specialized needs. Information about access to the National Geographic Names Database and available products can be obtained from the:

Manager, GNIS
U.S. Geological Survey
523 National Center
Reston, VA 20192-0523
Tel.: 703-648-4544
Fax: 703-648-4165
E-mail: gnis_manager@usgs.gov
Web: <http://mapping.usgs.gov/www/gnis>

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NATIONAL GAZETTEER

One product of GNIS is *The National Gazetteer of the United States of America*, which consists of a series of State and special listings of geographic names, present and past, used in the United States, and its territories and outlying areas. The series of publications, which will list over 3 million names and associated information when completed, is being prepared and published in cooperation with the Board on Geographic Names. Its purpose is to provide the general public with a relatively complete reference to the names of places, areas, and features in the United States and to establish a national standard for the written forms of these names and their applications. The title for each volume of *The National Gazetteer* consists of the name of the State or area covered and the year of publication. A single concise volume for the United States is available, listing about 42,000 names currently used for selected places and areas and major natural features.

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NATIONAL DIGITAL GAZETTEER (Compact Disc)

Another product of GNIS is the *National Digital Gazetteer* which is a compact disc (CD-ROM) containing geographic names and associated information for the Nation. Also included is the necessary software to search, retrieve, process, and export the information. The disc will be updated annually.

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DETERMINING OFFICIAL NAMES

It is the policy of the Federal Government that only official domestic geographic names are to be used on Federal maps and in other publications. An official name is one in which the written form of that name and its application to the appropriate place, feature, or area are approved by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names or the appropriate administrative agency (see [Appendix B](#)). By law, the Board is responsible for all geographic names except those applying to offices or establishments of Federal agencies (see [Appendix A, Sec. 1 and 7](#)). Practically, however, the Board decides primarily on the names of natural features of the land, unincorporated localities, and populated places in the United States and its territories and outlying areas. Unless asked to do so, the Board does not rule on the names of cultural features such as roads, streets, shopping centers, churches, schools, hospitals, and airports (see [Principle IV](#)). Borderline cases exist; for example, the Board determines the official names of reservoirs not formally named by Congress, but not the names of dams that form the reservoirs. The following statements define the Board's procedures for establishing and maintaining uniform geographic name usage for Federal maps and other publications.

The primary reference for official geographic names and their applications established by the Board on Geographic Names is the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS).

If a name has required a Board decision, it is listed with a decision year date (e.g. "BGN 1947") or without a year date for names recognized as official by Board policy. However, all entries have equal official status.

Pursuant to Public Law 80-242, geographic names not in GNIS must be submitted to the Board on Geographic Names for approval before they can be used on Federal maps, charts, and other publications.

The purpose of this directive is to ensure that GNIS, the primary reference for official names, is kept current and as complete as possible. It is to everyone's advantage that this procedure be followed faithfully. Most names submitted to the Board and reported to be in [local use](#) will be processed and approved for inclusion in GNIS. Because of their use as an authoritative graphic reference, it is particularly important that all names published on the base series maps and charts be recorded and agree in written form and application with GNIS name records.

The base series maps and charts are listed below:

1. Quadrangle maps (1:24,000 or 1:25,000 scale) of the National Topographic Map Series published by the U.S. Geological Survey and the U.S. Forest Service.
2. Nautical charts of coastal areas and inland waters published by the National Ocean Service.
3. National Forest Visitor maps published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service.
4. National Park area visitor maps published by the National Park Service.

These maps and charts are periodically revised, at which time the names and their applications are brought up to date in accordance with information in GNIS.

Any conflicts noted in name usage among maps in the base series or between one of these maps and GNIS should be brought to the attention of the Executive Secretary, Domestic Geographic Names, U.S. Board on Geographic Names, U.S. Geological Survey, 523 National Center, Reston, VA 20192-0523.

The GNIS is available interactively to Federal agencies, and up-to-date name information is also available by requesting current computer listings and information on magnetic media. Special searches for names in specific areas or for specific kinds of features are performed upon request.

Persons or organizations that do not have access to GNIS or do not have time to request GNIS information can use secondary sources for determining official geographic names. The most important of these secondary sources are the following:

- *The National Digital Gazetteer* (Compact Disc)
- *The National Gazetteer of the United States of America*
- The base series maps and charts published by the U.S. Geological Survey, the U.S. Forest Service, the National Ocean Service, and the National Park Service.

These secondary publications are an important source of official name information and are current at the time of publication.

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DOMESTIC NAMES DECISIONS

Shortly after its organization by public law in 1947, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names created a Domestic Names Committee and a Foreign Names Committee. It delegated to each authority to render decisions on individual geographic names in the name of the Board, within their respective spheres of interest and within established principles, policies, and procedures. Therefore, decisions of either committee are decisions of the Board and become official after review and approval by the Secretary of the Interior. However, new principles, policies, and procedures and major name cases or changes to any of these are normally taken to the full Board membership for review and approval before being submitted to the Secretary of the Interior.

Domestic geographic name problems and proposals submitted to the Board are researched individually by the support staff for the Domestic Names Committee for all factors that may affect the decision process and are put onto a docket list. The Domestic Names Committee has identified several factors to be considered, along with its principles, policies, and procedures, when deciding on name problems and proposals. These factors and their definitions are listed here alphabetically:

Established Usage

A geographic name that has appeared consistently in written usage and (or) has been expressed consistently in verbal usage, and that is supported by historical and (or) current written materials and (or) in folklore.

Historical Usage

A geographic name given and used during the early history of a place or feature; the name may be either obsolete or in current use.

Legal Usage

A geographic name that appears in a document generated as part of a legal procedure established by a government body; the document may either (1) establish the name, or (2) apply it incidentally in order to identify or locate an area, site, or feature important to the principal purpose of the document. This category includes "legislated usage," which, because of its importance to the naming process, is given special recognition.

Legislated Usage

A geographic name established by a legislative body--local, tribal, State, or Federal.

Local Usage

A geographic name commonly and currently used for an entity, whether in verbal and (or) written form, by persons having frequent enough contact with the entity to use the name on a regular basis.

Unnamed Feature

A geographic entity that is not known to have had a verbal or written name.

Verbal Usage

A name used by people when referring to a place, feature, or area in their own language as commonly spoken every day.

Written Usage

A geographic name in handwritten or printed form; for example, handwritten letters, diaries, and logs or names printed in newspapers or on maps or recorded in official, digital records.

Each docket list is sent to cooperating Federal, State, and tribal agencies and to interested organizations and individuals about 3 months before the Domestic Names Committee meeting at which the list is to be considered. Reviewing the merits of each case, the Committee decides between conflicting names and approves or disapproves proposed names for unnamed features and name changes. Each decision is guided by existing principles and policies and by factors involving established, historical, legal, legislated, written, and verbal usage (see [factors and definitions](#)). Some actions are temporarily deferred to allow more time for State and local

response or to obtain more information useful for making a decision. A record of the decisions at each monthly meeting is submitted to the Secretary of the Interior for review and concurrence. Name decisions of the Domestic Names Committee are decisions of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names and are entered into the National Geographic Names Database and published in decision lists.

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SPELLING OF GEOGRAPHIC NAMES

The Board's decisions establish standard spellings of geographic names for use by the Federal Government. When determining the spelling of names in the United States, the Board recognizes that geographic names, like other proper names, are not necessarily subject to the spelling rules that apply to other words in the English language. Although these standard spellings generally conform to rules of English, they may reflect historical spellings or forms commonly used or preferred by local citizens and may therefore include what appear to be grammatically incorrect, misspelled, improperly combined, or clipped words.

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Chapter 2

DOMESTIC GEOGRAPHIC NAMES PRINCIPLES

INTRODUCTION

Public Law 80-242 (1947) instructs the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, subject to the approval of the Secretary of the Interior, to formulate principles, policies, and procedures with reference to both domestic and foreign geographic names and to decide the standard names, their orthographies, and applications for official use. The following domestic geographic names principles reflect the underlying philosophy and primary guidelines used in national standardization since 1890. The Committee and the Board are guided by these principles when establishing policies and procedures and making decisions on domestic names.

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Principle I:

Use of the Roman Alphabet--Official domestic geographic names are written in the Roman alphabet as normally used for writing the English language. Diacritical marks, however, may be added to names as specified in Policy VI: Use of Diacritical Marks.

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Principle II:

Names in Local Usage--The underlying principle of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names for establishing official geographic names and their applications is recognition of present-day local usage or preferences. Exceptions occur when local spoken or written usage is in conflict with specific Board policy. In cases where local usage is conflicting or weak, well-established documented names and names with historical significance are given strong consideration (see [Domestic Names Decisions](#)).

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Principle III:

Names Established by Act of Congress or Executive Order--Geographic names and their applications specifically established by an act of Congress or Executive order are official by law. This does not apply to geographic names used incidentally in language of an act of Congress intended for other purposes, unless the language clearly indicates that naming is part of the intent of the act.

Names established by an act of Congress or by Executive order may include any of the entities specified in [Note 1](#) at the end of this chapter. If not named by act of Congress or Executive order, such entities generally are named by the administering agency under the authority of an act of Congress (see [Principle IV](#)).

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Principle IV:

Names Established by Other Authorities--Certain categories of names only rarely are the subject of decisions by the Board, generally because they fall within the purview of other authorities. These are specified in [Note 2](#) at the end of this chapter. The Board may, however, decide to rule on such names if necessary to settle conflicts between different agencies. Independent of whether decisions are rendered, the Board may include such names in lists it issues from time to time, as part of its responsibility to promulgate standard names for U.S. Government use. (See [Sec. 5 of Public Law 80-242 in Appendix A.](#))

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Principle V:

One Name for One Geographic Entity--The U.S. Board on Geographic Names identifies one name, spelling, and application as official for a geographic entity in the United States and its territories and outlying areas. For certain entities a shortened version of the official name may also be used in Federal publications (example: State of Wisconsin and Wisconsin; City of Atlanta and Atlanta).

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END NOTES FOR CHAPTER 2

NOTE 1 (See [Principle III](#))

National Fish Hatcheries (Interior/Fish and Wildlife Service)
National Forests (Agriculture/Forest Service)
National Game Ranges (Interior/Fish and Wildlife Service)
National Grasslands (Agriculture/Forest Service)
National Historic Landmarks (Interior/National Park Service)
National Historic Sites (Interior/National Park Service)
National Marine Sanctuaries (Commerce/National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration)
National Monuments (Interior/National Park Service)
National Parks (Interior/National Park Service)
National Recreation Areas (Agriculture/Forest Service and Interior/National Park Service)
National Recreation Trails (Agriculture/Forest Service and Interior/National Park Service)
National Scenic Trails (Agriculture/Forest Service and Interior/National Park Service)
National Seashores (Interior/National Park Service)
National Wild and Scenic Rivers (Agriculture/Forest Service and Interior/National Park Service)
National Wildlife Refuges (Interior/Fish and Wildlife Service)
Wilderness Areas (Interior or Agriculture)

The names of some reservoirs also have been established by Congress.

NOTE 2 (See [Principle IV](#))

The following categories of names generally are not the subject of decisions by the Board:

Facilities, offices, establishments, and bounded areas of administration of Federal agencies--
Examples are Forest Service stations and ranger districts (Department of Agriculture, Forest

Service); military bases and reservations (Department of Defense); Coast Guard lighthouses and lifesaving stations (Department of Transportation); and post offices (U.S. Postal Service). However, the names adopted by these agencies apply to the facilities themselves, but not necessarily to similar names of adjacent communities or geographic features. Such names may be the subject of Board decisions.

Facilities, offices, establishments, and bounded areas of administration of State and local governments--Examples are regional forest preserves, State parks, municipal buildings and parks, municipal airports, and public schools.

Indian reservations--Names of these generally are specified in an act of Congress, a treaty, or an Executive order.

Administrative geographic subdivisions (counties, cities, townships, and similar legally incorporated units)--These entities are created under State law, which typically prescribes procedures for establishing their names. Included are entities that generally have local self-government such as cities, towns, townships, boroughs, villages, and plantations (in Maine); districts, precincts, and similar entities established as administrative subdivisions of larger units; wards of cities; and municipios, barrios, and similar entities in Puerto Rico and the outlying areas. The Board frequently promulgates current information on such names but renders decisions only in rare instances of conflict or ambiguity between established sources.

Local transportation, communication, navigational, and water-management features--Names of highways, streets, bridges, ferries, tunnels, airports, radio and television towers, buoys, artificial fishing reefs, dams, ditches, and canals that are constructed or administered by a government or quasi-government agency generally are named by the appropriate office. Only if a conflict arises does the Board become involved.

Structures and other manmade features on private property--Examples are shopping malls, resorts, mines, oil rigs, churches, cemeteries, and stations, stops, and sidings of railroads and other public transit facilities. As in the case of post offices, a railroad station name does not automatically apply to the adjacent community, whose name may be the subject of a Board decision. A Board decision also may be called for when several property owners are involved or when a feature is no longer active (for example, an abandoned mine) if the correct name is in doubt.

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Chapter 3

DOMESTIC GEOGRAPHIC NAMES POLICIES

The U.S. Board on Geographic Names has formulated policies and procedures that deal with particular naming problems or issues. These policies have been developed over the past 100 years to encourage and permit uniformity and objectivity in the decision-making process and to assist in national standardization. Although most proposed geographic name situations and conditions will be addressed by these policies, there may be certain instances in which other factors must be considered to arrive at a suitable decision.

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POLICY I: NAMES BEING CONSIDERED BY CONGRESS

Geographic names and their applications specifically established by an act of Congress are official by law and, therefore, take precedence over decisions of the Board. Occasionally, a name or name-change proposal submitted to the Board becomes at the same time a matter of proposed legislation before Congress. To prevent confusion by possible conflicting action by the bodies, the Board adheres to the following policy:

Policy

The U.S. Board on Geographic Names will not render a decision on a name or its application if the matter is also being considered by the Congress of the United States. If Congress does not act on the proposed legislation by the end of its second session, the Board will not act on the case for 90 days after the beginning of the next session of Congress. If Congress formally declines to act on proposed naming legislation, the Board will wait 90 days before deciding on the case, unless new legislation is introduced during that period.

Approved by:
Board on Geographic Names
March 12, 1981

Approved by:
Secretary of the Interior
April 20, 1981

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POLICY II: NAME CHANGES

Geographic names, as do other categories of proper names, perform an important reference or label function in language. Each name identifies a particular geographic feature, place, or area. This function requires a high degree of stability in the spoken and written forms of names and their applications. Consequently, changes in existing names should not be made without good

reason. The U.S. Board on Geographic Names will consider every proposal involving a name change on an individual basis, and the merits of each case will be carefully evaluated.

Definition

"Name change" means formally changing the proper name of a place, feature, or area in the United States or its territories and outlying areas now recognized by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names as official for use on Federal maps and in other Federal publications. The Board recognizes three classes of name changes:

- a. Those made to bring Federal official usage into agreement with well-established local usage.
2. Those made to eliminate particular name problems as in cases involving derogatory names, name duplication, and names originally authorized on the basis of incorrect information.
3. Those made at the request of persons or organizations, public or private, for commemorative or other reasons important to the proposer.

Policy

sec. 1

General: The U.S. Board on Geographic Names does not encourage changes in official geographic names. It will not initiate changes in domestic geographic names except in rare cases such as those involving certain derogatory names and name duplications. All name change proposals are evaluated in cooperation with State geographic names authorities, Federal, State, and tribal agencies, local governments, other authoritative bodies, and the public.

sec. 2

Conforming to Local Usage: It is the policy of the Board to follow present-day local usage whenever possible. However, the Board will consider proposals to change official names that do not agree with well-established local usage or its applications. Considerations other than local usage may be overriding in certain individual cases. Factors such as Board policies, document usage, population density, and State, tribal, and local governmental needs are always considered in Board decisions.

sec. 3

Derogatory Names: The Board has a firm policy prohibiting the inclusion of a word in an official geographic name considered by the Board to be derogatory to any racial, ethnic, gender, or religious group (see [Policy V: Derogatory Names](#)).

sec. 4

Duplicate Names: Common names are often applied over and over again in the naming process. Where duplication leads to confusion, the Board encourages requests to change names in order to eliminate duplication (see [Policy VII: Name Duplication](#)).

Approved by:
Board on Geographic Names
March 12, 1981

Approved by:
Secretary of the Interior
April 20, 1981

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POLICY III: COMMEMORATIVE NAMES

Naming is a basic human tendency; just as a name helps to create a distinct identity for an individual, a geographic name helps distinguish one place from another. Naming geographic features after individuals is one way that settlers marked the land; one way they signified that their lives on it and their contributions to it were important. Commemorative naming gave them a sense of ownership, assured the continued remembrance of them and their deeds. Naming a river, a mountain, or a valley helped create the familiar, often reminding them of another place, person, or time.

Over the years the role of the Board has changed and grown. In a Nation where numerous individuals are remembered for their accomplishments, the Board follows established principles, policies, and procedures to decide whose name may be applied to a natural feature for U.S. official maps and publications. In some cases, the Board may be able to suggest alternatives to geographic naming that might better commemorate the individual.

Policy

sec. 1

The U.S. Board on Geographic Names will consider proposals for assignment of the names or nicknames of deceased persons to geographic features in the United States and areas under the jurisdiction of the United States. The Board will not consider names that commemorate or may be construed to commemorate living persons. In addition, a person must be deceased at least 5 years before a commemorative proposal will be

considered.

sec. 2

The person being honored by the naming should have had either some direct and long-term association with the feature or have made a significant contribution to the area or State in which it is located.

sec. 3

A proposal commemorating an individual with an outstanding national or international reputation will be considered even if the person was not directly associated with the geographic feature.

sec. 4

All commemorative name proposals must meet the same basic criteria required of any other name proposal.

Guidelines

A proposal to commemorate an individual should contain evidence of local support for the proposed name and its application. Such evidence may be in the form of letters from local residents and administrative agency personnel and (or) petitions containing original signatures of local citizens.

In States with no official State names authority, approval must be obtained from local governing bodies such as the county commissioners or supervisors or the town selectmen.

Past decisions by the Board have found "direct association" or "significant contribution" when the person being commemorated was a(n):

- early or long-time settler - 20 or more years
- developer of the designated feature
- restorer or maintainer of the feature
- donor of the land to State or Federal Government
- person who played a large part in protecting the land for public benefit.

A person's death on or at a feature such as in a mountaineering accident or plane crash, or the mere ownership of land or the feature, does not normally meet the "direct association" criterion.

The Board urges careful review of an individual's association with the intended feature, as well

as the proposal's consistency with other Board policies, before submitting the proposal.

Approved by:
Board on Geographic Names
April 22, 1986

Approved by:
Secretary of the Interior
May 27, 1986

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POLICY IV: WILDERNESS AREAS

In the Wilderness Act of 1964 (Public Law 88-577, 78 Stat. 890) Congress established the National Wilderness Preservation System composed of federally owned areas to be administered:

"...for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, and so as to provide for the protection of these areas, the preservation of their wilderness character, and for the gathering and dissemination of information regarding their use and enjoyment as wilderness... ."

The act characterizes wilderness "as an area where the Earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man [and] where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

Though wilderness designations are a modern invention, a fundamental characteristic of elemental wilderness is that features are nameless and the cultural overlay of civilization is absent. No wilderness is today totally free of placenames and cultural artifacts, but a goal of Federal wilderness area administration is to minimize the impacts and traces of people. Wilderness areas designated by Congress are managed to preserve their unique natural, scenic, educational, scientific, and primitive values.

Policy

sec. 1

Within wilderness areas, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names will not approve proposed names for unnamed features, names in local use but not published on a base series map, or unpublished administrative names used by administering agencies, unless an overriding need exists, such as for purposes of safety, education, or area administration.

sec. 2

Name proposals commemorating persons are discouraged and will not be considered

unless the criteria in Section 1 and the Commemorative Names Policy are met (see [Policy III](#)).

sec. 3

All new name proposals involving wilderness areas must meet the same basic criteria required of any other name proposal. These criteria also apply to names in areas being considered for possible designation by Congress as wilderness areas.

Guidelines

The administering Federal agency will review new name proposals and advise the U.S. Board on Geographic Names of its findings relative to overriding need. Final approval or disapproval will be made by the Board.

Persons wishing to name an unnamed feature in a wilderness area should coordinate their proposal with the Federal agency responsible for the administration of the area.

Approved by:
Board on Geographic Names
April 16, 1985

Approved by:
Secretary of the Interior
June 21, 1985

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POLICY V: DEROGATORY NAMES

The guiding principle of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names for the names of places, features, and areas in the United States and its territories is to adopt for official Federal use the names found in present-day local usage. An exception to this principle occurs when a name is shown to be highly offensive or derogatory to a particular racial or ethnic group, gender, or religious group. In such instances, the Board does not approve use of the names for Federal maps, charts, and other publications.

The Board, however, is conservative in this matter and prefers to interfere as little as possible with the use of names in everyday language because attitudes and perceptions of words considered to be pejorative vary between individuals and can change connotation from one generation to another. Geographic names are part of the historical record of the United States, and that record may be either distorted or disrupted by the elimination of names associated with particular groups of Americans. Such unwarranted action by the Board could, in time, be a disservice to the people the process is meant to protect.

Policy

In the case of domestic geographic names, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names will not adopt a name for Federal usage that is determined by the Board to be derogatory to a particular racial or ethnic group, gender, or religious group.

Guidelines

Any individual or agency may request the Board to change a currently used name on grounds the name is derogatory or patently offensive.

Requests for name changes should be in the form of an application to the Board including reasons why the present name should not be used. The requester must offer an alternative name as part of the application following Board guidelines for submittal of name proposals.

Upon receipt of a request to change a derogatory name, the Board will investigate the background for the current name and will solicit from the appropriate State names authority that organization's views on the proposed change, including any alternatives.

In considering a change proposal, the Board will give careful consideration to all relevant factors, including the extent and distribution of usage, historical context, user perceptions and intent, and lexical meanings.

The Board will not adopt a name proposal that includes the word "Jap" or the word "Nigger" whether or not it is in current local usage and regardless of by whom proposed. In the event of a name change, the prior form will appear in the permanent record as a variant.

Approved by:
Board on Geographic Names
June 23, 1983

Approved by:
Secretary of the Interior
July 28, 1983

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POLICY VI: USE OF DIACRITICAL MARKS

The U.S. Board on Geographic Names has not customarily recognized accent or other diacritical marks as part of the spelling of geographic names in the United States (see [Principle I](#)). Such marks are almost never used in English, but they constitute part of the spelling in many other languages, including Spanish and French from which numerous placenames in the United States are derived. Most geographic names adopted from non-English languages have been assimilated into English usage and therefore lack the diacritical marks that were included in the

original spelling. In some cases, however, especially in the areas of the United States where Spanish or French are still spoken, there are names for which active local usage may indicate that diacritical marks should be included. Diacriticals may be especially important if their omission would result in a significant change in the meaning of the name in the parent language.

In the past, the Board has sanctioned the use of a name form containing diacritical marks in a few exceptional cases.

Policy

The presence of diacritical marks will not necessarily bar approval of a geographic name by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names; each such name will be considered on a case-by-case basis. A spelling that includes diacritical marks will be approved if, in the judgment of the Board, there is substantial evidence of active local use, such as official records, maps, and signs, in the area where the feature is located. Names using special marks not normally found in the English language are considered variant names (see [Principle I](#)).

Approved by:
Board on Geographic Names
April 22, 1986

Approved by:
Secretary of the Interior
May 27, 1986

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POLICY VII: NAME DUPLICATION

The role of geographic names in language is to provide unambiguous labels to identify geographic entities. Duplication of names within an area often causes confusion and misunderstanding.

Name duplication, however, is common within a county, State, or Nation because naming is a natural process. Although name duplication within a county or State is undesirable, well-established geographic names should not be changed unless there is strong public support for the change.

Definition

Name duplication occurs when two or more places or features of the same kind, relatively close to each other, have the same name in local or published usage. Name duplication does not occur when places or features of different kinds have the same name, such as a stream called

Long Creek and a village called Longcreek or Long Creek.

Policy

sec. 1

Names proposed for unnamed geographic features that duplicate another name in the State or nearby in an adjoining State will not normally be approved by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names.

sec. 2

The Board encourages efforts by State and local governments and local citizens to change or modify one or more duplicate names wherever ambiguity is likely to occur. Such name changes should be coordinated with the Board.

Approved by:
Board on Geographic Names
March 12, 1981

Approved by:
Secretary of the Interior
April 20, 1981

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POLICY VIII: USE OF VARIANT NAMES

The U.S. Board on Geographic Names was established to bring uniformity to name usage on Federal maps and in Federal documents. From its inception the Board has identified a single official spelling for each domestic geographic entity. For certain names of rivers and political subdivisions, both a long form and a short form are identified and either may be used (for example, City of Chicago or Chicago).

A variant is any current or historical name or spelling for a geographic entity other than its official name. Known variant names and applications are specified in Board decisions. The Board disapproves the independent use of any variant, but a variant may be given in parentheses following the approved name.

Policy

sec. 1

In adopting a domestic geographic name, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names will identify one name, spelling, and application as official for a geographic entity. For names

of political and civil divisions, either a long form or a short form may be used.

sec. 2

The Board does not allow the use of parentheses in an official name, but a variant in parentheses may be used after the official name if needed for purposes of clarity or reference. The independent use of any name other than the official name is not approved.

Guidelines

Use of a variant name in parentheses following an official name on a Federal map or chart or in a report is at the discretion of the author and the issuing agency.

On a map or chart, a name in parentheses may appear either following the official name or below it. It should always be clear which name is the official one. The Board does not object to the listing of such variant names in a tabular or dictionary format in order to convey special information such as pronunciation, name origin, or word meaning. A statement explaining the purpose of the table or dictionary and why the names listed vary from official names should be included.

An example of the use of variant names in this manner developed after a national system of scenic, historic, and recreation trails was authorized by Public Law 90-543 on October 2, 1968 (amended November 10, 1978). These national trails may coincide in part with trails having well-established names that differ from the official names fixed by legislation. When this occurs, and there is a need to retain the older established name for reference or identification, it is recommended that the older name be shown in parentheses after the official name. Example: "Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail (John Muir Trail)."

Possible reasons for use of variant names include the following:

- a. To show an alternative name in current or recent local use.
2. To show a former name that has been changed.
3. To show a foreign name for a feature crossing an international boundary.
4. To show a local name that applies only to part of a feature.

Approved by:
Board on Geographic Names
February 9, 1984

Approved by:
Secretary of the Interior
March 23, 1984

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POLICY IX: LONG NAMES

Almost since its inception, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names has expressed a preference against long and clumsily constructed domestic geographic names. Although the Board does not specifically define what constitutes an unacceptably long name, if the length of a name is such that it is difficult or cumbersome to use in written or spoken form, then such a name generally will not be approved by the Board.

This statement deals with three specific categories of long names, as follows:

- a. Legislated names for reservoirs, dams, and other features, assigned to commemorate some individual and typically using his or her full name. These are termed "legislated feature names." Examples include Richard B. Russell Dam and Lake (Georgia) and Bob Marshall Wilderness Area (Montana). If such names are assigned by an act of Congress, they are not subject to modification by the Board on Geographic Names.
2. Names adopted to commemorate an individual, using more than the surname so as to make the referent person unmistakable. These names are distinguishable from category "a" because their motive is to avoid ambiguity. They are termed "full commemorative names." Examples include Walter E. Long Lake (Texas), Claude Birdseye Point (Arizona), and George R. Stewart Peak (California).
3. Names of stream forks or branches that might be regarded as incomplete without including the names of their main streams. These are termed "long stream names." Examples include East Fork North Fork North Fork American River and North Fork of Middle Fork American River.

Policy

sec. 1

For names of domestic geographic features established by a legislative body other than Congress, the Board on Geographic Names will follow its general policy relative to the use of personal names. Under that policy, the full name of a person as the specific part of a geographic name normally is not approved.

sec. 2

This policy also applies to proposals to use an individual's full name to emphasize the commemorative intent of the name. Exceptions are occasionally made by the Board

when a person's full name, or parts of a full name, are short and euphonious or where the surname used alone would be ambiguous.

sec. 3

Names of tributaries will be approved by the Board as official names without reference to their parent stream, provided they are unambiguous and meet the Board's other guidelines for approving a name. If a tributary name is deemed to be ambiguous without the name of its parent stream, the Board will consider (1) extending the name of the parent stream to the tributary or (2) requesting an alternative proposal. If neither of these alternatives is possible, the Board will consider including the name of the parent stream in the approved name of the tributary.

Guidelines

In reviewing legislated geographic feature names, the Board will consider adopting the full legislated name with selective underscoring to specify the surname portion (for example, John H. McClintick Dam).

Proposals for adoption of full commemorative names are considered individually as part of the overall review of the appropriateness of the names. If the full name is approved to avoid ambiguity, selective underscoring will not be adopted to permit use of the surname portion of the name alone.

If a stream name is approved that includes the name of the parent stream, only the full approved name may be used, not a shortened form that omits the parent stream name.

Approved by:
Board on Geographic Names
April 22, 1986

Approved by:
Secretary of the Interior
May 27, 1986

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POLICY X: NAMES OF NATIVE AMERICAN ORIGIN

Geographic names derived from the languages of Native Americans are an important and integral part of the cultural heritage of the United States. As part of its standard review procedure for proposed names, the Board will consult with federally recognized tribes having an historic or cultural affiliation with the geographic location of the feature. In addition, the Board may consult with such other organized Native American entities as it finds may have an interest in the feature being proposed for naming. The following policy clarifies the Board's position concerning the official use of names derived from Native American languages used in the

United States and its territories and outlying areas.

Policy

sec. 1

Official Use of Geographic Names Derived From Native American Languages: The U.S. Board on Geographic Names supports and promotes the official use of geographic names derived from Native American languages. To this end, the expert documentation of these names in current use is encouraged. The final selection, spelling, and application of the names for official use on Federal maps and other publications are based on policies and orthographic guidelines established by the Board.

sec. 2

Changing Established Geographic Names Derived From Native American Languages: The U.S. Board on Geographic Names generally will not consider proposals changing the spellings and (or) applications of long-published, well-established geographic names of Native American origin in order to conform to current standards of spelling correctness and (or) name referent accuracy.

sec. 3

Changing Established Geographic Names Derived From Non-Native Languages Within Areas of Native American Tribal Jurisdiction.

- a. Proposals to change widely known, long-published geographic names derived from non-Native American languages for major (primary) features within, or partly within, areas of Native American tribal jurisdiction rarely will be considered by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names unless such changes have extensive public support and are approved by appropriate State and tribal authorities.**
- 2. Proposals to change published names derived from non-Native American languages in order to conform with local usage for other than major (primary) features within, or partly within, areas of Native American tribal jurisdiction will be considered by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. Decisions affecting such name changes will be made in cooperation with tribal and State authorities.**

sec. 4

Proposing Geographic Names for Unnamed Features Within Areas of Native American Tribal Jurisdiction. Proposals to name unnamed natural features (that is, features for

which there are no published or local names in current use) within, or partly within, areas of Native American tribal jurisdiction must conform to established Board guidelines for such naming and be supported by the tribal government before being considered for approval by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names.

sec. 5

Geographic Names of Native American Language Origin in Local Use Outside Areas of Tribal Jurisdiction. Unpublished geographic names used by Native Americans for places and features outside areas of tribal jurisdiction will be given appropriate consideration with similar unpublished non-Native American names for the same places and features. The U.S. Board on Geographic Names, in each case, will decide on a name for official use according to routine decision criteria.

sec. 6

Proposing Geographic Names Derived From Native American Languages for Unnamed Features Outside Areas of Tribal Jurisdiction. Proposals to apply names derived from Native American languages to unnamed features (that is, without published or local names in current use) outside areas of tribal jurisdiction will be considered for approval by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. Proposals of this kind:

- a. Must meet the requirements outlined in the Board's guidelines for proposing names for unnamed features.**
- 2. Should be linguistically appropriate to the area in which each is to be applied (that is, in each case, the language from which the name is derived is, or once was, spoken in the area by a relatively permanent population).**
- 3. Must conform to the Board's orthographic guidelines for the writing of Native American geographic names.**

sec. 7

Generic Terms Recommended for Geographic Names Derived From Native American Languages. The U.S. Board on Geographic Names recommends the use of generic terms with names derived from Native American languages that are easily understood by the general public and are common to the areas in which the names are applied. This policy applies even though the Native American names may already contain generic elements.

Approved by:
Board on Geographic Names
April 18, 1996

Approved by:
Secretary of the Interior
August 15, 1996

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Chapter 4

PROCEDURES AND GUIDELINES

SUBMITTING NAME CORRECTIONS AND CHANGES

The National Geographic Names Database within the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) contains the geographic names approved for use on Federal maps and charts and other publications. A correction or change to an official geographic name record in the database can be initiated by submitting the appropriate information to the Executive Secretary for Domestic Geographic Names, U.S. Board on Geographic Names. Such corrections or changes are generally based on discovered typographical errors or evidence that local or predominant published/legal usage is in conflict with the official record. Proposed changes must be submitted to the Board for review and approval before they can be used in Federal publications. (See [Determining Official Names](#).)

The Board's procedure for reviewing name conflicts includes submitting the cases to local, Federal, and State agencies, and where the conflict relates to a major geographic feature, it also includes publicizing it in the news media. This procedure alerts the agencies and the general public to the problem and solicits their comments and recommendations. Where a name conflict is associated with a feature on an international boundary with Canada or Mexico, the review procedure includes contact with appropriate Canadian or Mexican names authorities for their comments.

In approving names for publication or official recognition, the key factor is to submit the requested correction or change to the Board well in advance of the publication date in order to allow adequate time for the correction or approval process. This leadtime can vary between 1 to 6 or more months depending on the nature of the submittal. Typographical corrections, for example, can be made by the Board's support staff in a few days, but some controversial changes may take several months.

Upon request, in emergency cases the Board and its staff will attempt to expedite the review

and approval process. If, however, approval is not received before a publication deadline, the name or names involved should be used as indicated in the database or left off maps and charts.

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SUBMITTING NONRECORDED NAMES

A nonrecorded name is one that is not currently in the GNIS. It is a name recently collected and represented as being in local usage or in established publication or legal use.

All such names are to be submitted to the Board on Geographic Names for review and approval before they may be used in Federal publications. These names generally will not be docketed and will be processed, approved, or rejected, in less than 30 calendar days. The person or agency submitting the names will be notified immediately of the actions taken.

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PROCEDURE FOR SUBMITTING CORRECTIONS, CHANGES, AND NONRECORDED NAMES

Proposals to change an official name, its spelling, or application can be made by submitting appropriate information to the Executive Secretary for Domestic Geographic Names, U.S. Board on Geographic Names. This can be done by letter, by using the standard Domestic Geographic Name Report (see [Appendix C](#)), or by established telecommunication or other procedures. All proposals should clearly identify the feature and include required evidence supporting the proposal. If the communication is by letter or report form, feature identification can be done by map annotation. Other procedures require identification by means of accurate geographic coordinates. The Board's decision may differ in name, choice, form, spelling, or application from that recommended by the proposing agency or individual. However, all Federal agencies are required to accept the Board's decision and to correct their maps and reports accordingly before publication, or, if already published, at the time the map or maps are next printed.

Nonrecorded names and obvious typographical errors may be submitted by telecommunication methods or by annotated map or maps. Here again, clear identification of the feature is important. The information submitted or annotated on a map should indicate the source of the name (e.g. "local usage-- people"; "county highway map, 1994") or the nature of the typographical error.

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PROPOSING NAMES FOR UNNAMED DOMESTIC FEATURES

Although the principal guide for determining domestic standard names is present-day spoken and written local usage, the Board realizes that there are occasional needs for reference or commemorative purposes to name features that are presently unnamed. The U.S. Board on Geographic Names does not initiate naming of unnamed domestic features, but it is authorized to consider proposals for new names for use with Federal maps and publications and for other uses. Any person or organization, public or private, may submit a name proposal to the Board for consideration.

A new name will affect many people for a long time; thus, it must be acceptable to local citizens, involved local, State, and Federal agencies, and other users. The Board's responsibility is to evaluate each name proposal as to appropriateness, acceptability, and need (relative to the feature, its location, and the user community) before it is adopted. This is done in cooperation with State geographic names authorities, Federal, State, and tribal agencies, local governments, and the public. As a general policy, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names avoids excessive or needless naming of features.

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Guidelines for Proposing Names

These guidelines apply only to features that have never been named. Names for features already established in spoken or written form among local citizens, even though the names do not appear on current maps, are given priority (see [Policy II: Name Changes](#)). A person who wishes to propose a name for an unnamed feature is expected to determine, to the best of his or her ability, whether the feature is actually unnamed. The best sources for locating unnamed features are large-scale maps and charts published by the Federal and State Governments. U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps and National Ocean Service nautical charts, for example, can be found in most large map libraries. When considering a proposal to name an unnamed feature, the Board on Geographic Names is guided by the following policies and criteria:

Recommended Kinds of Proposed Names: The U.S. Board on Geographic Names prefers imaginative names that are relatively distinctive provided they are not incompatible with the forms of other names existing in the areas in which they will be used. Names descriptive of topographic form or suggested by local history, folklore, or incident, or by associated natural life or other phenomena are preferred. This includes Native American and other ethnic names appropriate to the area in which the feature is located.

Duplication of Names (see [Policy VII: Name Duplication](#)): A proposed name should not duplicate another name in the State or nearby in an adjoining State.

Recommended Name Form: Proposed names are expected to perform useful service as proper names. They normally should be as short as possible and easily pronounced. Preferably, the pronunciation should be apparent from the spelling. Names that are complex and difficult to pronounce often are not accepted by users.

Qualifying Words in Names: Use of qualifying or relational words (middle, upper, north, big, etc.), in the naming of features such as lakes, mountains, branches of streams, and canyons, should be avoided where possible. Proposed names should be distinctive.

Generic Terms: When a proposed geographic name includes both a specific and generic element, the generic term (creek, cerro, ridge, lake, col, etc.) should be appropriate to the feature and should normally be consistent with generic terms already used and understood in the area in which the feature is located.

Personal Names (see Policy III: Commemorative Names): A personal name proposed for a geographic feature will not be adopted unless it is determined to be in the public interest to honor the person or family for historical or commemorative reasons. To justify adoption of the name by the Board, the person or family being honored should have been directly associated with the feature being named or have made a significant contribution to the area of the feature or the State in which it is located. Experience shows that local citizens and other name users often resent and even resist using names that commemorate people. Ownership of land should never in itself be sufficient grounds for honoring a person in a geographic name. Proposals honoring exceptional national or international figures also will be considered.

The following established policies apply to all name proposals in which a personal name is used:

- a. The U.S. Board on Geographic Names will not adopt names that commemorate, or may be construed to commemorate, living persons.
2. A person (persons) must have been deceased at least 5 years before a commemorative proposal will be considered.
3. The full name of a person as the specific part of a geographic name normally is not approved. Exceptions are occasionally made when a person's full name, or parts of a full name, are short and euphonious. The Board recommends that a name proposal include a surname or given name alone with an appropriate generic term. The use of a person's epithet, nickname, or title often provides a more interesting and enduring name, which may also be more readily accepted and used by the public because it is less flauntingly commemorative.

Names in Wilderness Areas (see [Policy IV: Wilderness Areas](#)): It is the policy of the U.S.

Board on Geographic Names not to approve new names within designated wilderness and proposed wilderness areas unless an overriding need exists, such as for purposes of safety, education, or area administration. The administering Federal agency will review new name proposals and advise the Board of its findings relative to overriding need. Final approval or disapproval will be made by the Board.

Lands Administered by State and Local Jurisdictions: If the feature lies in lands administered by State, tribal, or local jurisdictions, the name proposal will be coordinated with the responsible jurisdiction (see [Principle IV](#)).

Derogatory Names (see [Policy V: Derogatory Names](#)): The U.S. Board on Geographic Names will not adopt a name proposal that implies discrimination or is shown to be derogatory to a particular racial or ethnic group, gender, or religious group. This also applies to names considered obscene or blasphemous in a present-day cultural context.

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Procedures for Proposing a Name for an Unnamed Feature

A proposed name for an unnamed feature must be approved by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names before it can be used on Federal maps or in other Federal publications. In each case a proposal (see [Appendix C](#)) must be submitted to the Board in writing along with the following information:

- a. Full form of the geographic name being proposed.
2. Location and clear identification of the feature to be named.
3. Reason for naming the feature.
4. Origin or meaning of the proposed name.
5. Basis of knowledge that the feature is unnamed.

If the proposed name commemorates a person (persons), additional information is needed:

- a. Full name of each person.
2. Birth and death dates of each person if known.
3. A short biography of the person to be honored indicating his or her association with the

feature or area.

A map marked to show the exact delineation of the feature to be named is helpful. Preferably this should be a Federal, State, or county topographic map with appropriate grids and scales for measuring distances and determining precise locations.

Board review of a proposal will be expedited if the proposer furnishes some evidence of local support for a proposed name. Such evidence may be in the form of:

- a. Letters from appropriate Federal, State, tribal, or local administrative authorities and State or tribal geographic names authorities.
2. Petitions for the name signed by local residents.
3. Newspaper clippings of articles and letters to the editor showing public awareness and endorsement of the proposed name.

Without such evidence of support, final action on a proposal may take 3 to 6 (or more) months because the Board works closely with State geographic names authorities or committees and with interested Federal and State agencies and local citizens before deciding on a name. A name proposal for a feature on an international boundary may require additional time for processing because the Board will forward the proposal to the appropriate foreign names authority for its endorsement before taking any action.

Proposals or inquiries may be directed to:

Executive Secretary
Domestic Geographic Names Committee
U.S. Board on Geographic Names
c/o U.S. Geological Survey
523 National Center
Reston, VA 20192-0523
Tel: 703-648-4544
Fax: 703-648-4165

Approved by:
Board on Geographic Names
September 8, 1977

Approved by:
Secretary of the Interior
January 21, 1980

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THE TREATMENT OF NAMES OF GEOGRAPHIC FEATURES SHARED BY THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

1. Coordination in the Naming of Trans-Boundary Features

1.1 Mutual Benefit

WHEREAS: the coordination in the naming of geographic entities on or across the United States-Canada boundary is of mutual benefit to the names authorities in both countries, and to mapping and surveying agencies; and

1.2 Different Names and Different Spellings

WHEREAS: the historical development of the United States and Canada has resulted in several different names or different spellings of the same names for geographic features along their mutual border; it is

1.3 Preservation of Cultural Heritages and Histories

Recommended: that, the different names, and different spellings of the same names, be respected by the appropriate names authorities in each country, in cases where such variances reflect differences in the cultural heritages and historical perspectives of the two countries.

1.4 One Feature - One Name

WHEREAS: it is practical, where culturally acceptable, for a single official name (specific and generic) to be considered for adoption by the United States and Canadian names authorities (State, Federal, Provincial, where appropriate) for the same entity; it is

1.5 Mutual Effort in the Treatment of Names

Recommended: that similar and effective policies and procedures for Treatment of Names for handling names of transboundary physical geographic features be established in both countries; and it is

1.6 Cooperative Action

Recommended: that, where a name is proposed for an entity that is unnamed on both sides of the boundary, that name must be submitted to and considered for approval by the appropriate names authorities; if local usage supports the proposal, official adoption of the same name may proceed in both countries.

1.7 Established Name on One Side of the Boundary

Recommended: that, where a geographic entity has an official name on one side of the boundary only, the appropriate names authorities in the other country should consider adoption of the same name, provided it is supported by local usage.

1.8 Joint Adoption of Names, with Unofficial Use on One Side of the Boundary

Recommended: that, where a geographic entity has a name in current but unofficial use on one side of the boundary, the appropriate names authorities in both countries should consider that name for adoption, after local consultation on both sides of the boundary.

1.9 Multiple Names for a Single Feature

Recommended: that, where a geographic entity has a different name in current, but not yet official, use on each side of the boundary, and the appropriate names authorities are unable to agree on a single name, the appropriate authority in each country either (a) may make its own name official, or (b) may decide not to make any name official at that time.

2. Name Changing

2.1 Name-Change Policy

WHEREAS: it is highly desirable to retain established official names; it is

Recommended: that, for purpose of conformance to strong local usage or citizen preference, or on special request with strong specific reasons, or mutual standardization, with local agreement a change of an official name may be considered by the appropriate names authorities in both countries.

3. Generic and Feature Class Terminology

3.1 Mutual Understanding

WHEREAS: it is desirable for the mutual understanding of geographic terminology in use in each country, and for the facilitation of information exchange, to identify classes of named features, and to have available documentation explaining generic terms and feature classes; it is

3.2 Exchange of Documentation on Terminology

Recommended: that the appropriate names authorities in each country prepare and exchange documentation on terminology and generic terms used in their geographic names; and it is

3.3 Automated Geographic Names Databases

Recommended: that automated geographic names databases developed by names authorities in each country include appropriate information on generic terms and feature classes, for the purpose of data exchange.

4. Implementation

4.1 Agreement on Principles

WHEREAS: representatives from the United States and Canadian names authorities have reached agreement on a number of principles for handling boundary name problems; and

4.2 Agreement on Procedures

WHEREAS: procedures as set out in [Appendix A](#) (not included in this publication) are required to implement the principles, it is

4.3 Adoption

Recommended: that actions be undertaken to carry out the recommendations.

Approved by:
U.S. Board on Geographic Names
August 30, 1989

Approved by:
Canadian Permanent
Committee on
Geographical Names
August 11, 1989

Approved by:
U.S. Secretary of the Interior
November 10, 1989

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WATER RIGHTS NAMES

In most Western States, the use of water is based on the law of appropriation. The essence is that a water right is acquired by diverting water from a natural source and applying it to

beneficial use. In an attempt to provide a coordinated and integrated selection of rights to a common drainage system, the States have enacted statutory adjudication procedures. The names used for streams, ditches, canals, and reservoirs in adjudicated water rights records assume certain legal status. Generally, no rules apply to the choice of names used for feature reference in the records and, for this reason, some of the names are in conflict with Board on Geographic Names principles and policies.

Guidelines

The principles and policies of the Board on Geographic Names apply to adjudicated water rights names. These names must be approved by the Board before they are used on Federal maps and in other Federal publications. The Board normally will approve adjudicated water rights names that clearly are not in conflict with its principles and policies. For example, a commemorative name will not be considered for approval unless the person or persons for whom the feature is named have been deceased 5 years, or if the personal name already is used in another nearby or related feature name that is considered official. Water rights names that conflict with clearly established local usage will not be approved.

Procedures

The official reference for geographic names and their application is the GNIS). Names not in GNIS must be approved by the Board before they can be used in a Federal publication.

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ALPHABETIZING AND SEQUENCING RULES FOR GEOGRAPHIC NAMES

The following rules are for alphabetizing and numerical ordering of geographic names in Federal files, listings, and gazetteers. These rules are not for the selection, application, or formatting of any particular geographic name.

Name Format

Before geographic names can be put into alphabetical or numerical order, they must be arranged in data entry format. The majority of geographic names in which the specific term is followed by the generic term are already in data entry format.

Examples: Red River
Big Rock Hollow

1. Names of physical features in which a generic term precedes the specific term, however, are listed with the specific term first, followed by a comma, and then the generic term and

any associated preposition and (or) article.

Examples: Adams, Mount
Ann, Lake
Woods, Lake of the
Nevada, Sierra

2. Names of populated places, administrative areas, and other cultural features are always listed in reading order.

Examples: Lake Placid
Mount Calvary

3. In names of domestic physical features, both English and non-English initial definite articles are reversed.

Examples: Capitan, El
Drain, The
Mesa, La
Thoroughfare, The

4. Names containing Arabic numerals are not always spelled out, and when not, any initial generic terms are left in reading order.

Examples: Camp 22
Canal 14
Ditch 23
School Number 14
Township 33

Alphabetizing Rules

1. Spaces, hyphens, periods, apostrophes, diacritical marks, parentheses, bracketed labels, and underlining are all disregarded.
2. Uppercase and lowercase letters are treated alike.
3. Roman numerals are letters of the alphabet and are treated as such.
4. Names containing both letters and Arabic numerals are treated as follows:
 - a. Where the numerals are in initial position within a name, the sequencing is accomplished according to the numerical order of the number after the alphabetical

sequencing of other names.

A

B

C

.

.

.

Z

1 Branch

2 Creek

23 River

220 Town

2. If a generic term precedes a numeral within a name, the sequencing is accomplished according to the order of the letters in the generic term and then according to the numerical order of the number after the alphabetical sequencing of other names.

Camp Orinoco

Camp Twenty

Camp Yahoo

Camp 22

Camp 44

Sequencing Rules

1. Geographic names are sequenced by the alphabetical order of the letters that occur up to a comma, if present, or to the end of the name, if a comma is not present.
2. Names with the same order of letters up to a comma are sequenced by the alphabetical order of the letters following the comma.
3. Names with the same order of letters throughout the name are sequenced by the next subordinate level civil division.
4. Names with the same order of letters throughout the name and next subordinate level civil division are sequenced by the numerical order of the feature's latitude from lowest to highest.
5. Names with the same order of letters throughout the name and with the same next subordinate level civil division and the same latitude are sequenced by the numerical order of the feature's longitude from lowest to highest.

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Chapter 5

EDITORIAL GUIDELINES

WRITING MARKS

Writing marks such as hyphens and apostrophes are occasionally used in domestic geographic names. Usage varies and care should be taken to use the standard form for a particular feature name. Hyphens are sometimes used in names consisting of a phrase (Hole-in-the-Wall, Go-to-it Creek) and in names having a dual-form specific (Clark-Mallard Ditch, Alma-Cassville Trail). Hyphens are generally not to be used to separate syllables in Native American names.

Apostrophes suggesting possession or association are not to be used within the body of a proper geographic name (Henrys Fork: not Henry's Fork). The word or words that form a geographic name change their connotative function and together become a single denotative unit. They change from words having specific dictionary meaning to fixed labels used to refer to geographic entities. The need to imply possession or association no longer exists. Thus, we write "Jamestown" instead of "James' town" or even "Richardsons Creek" instead of "Richard's son's creek." The whole name can be made possessive or associative with an apostrophe at the end as in "Rogers Point's rocky shore." Apostrophes may be used within the body of a geographic name to denote a missing letter (Lake O' the Woods) or when they normally exist in a surname used as part of a geographic name (O'Malley Hollow).

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ABBREVIATIONS AND NUMBER NAMES

Names of States can be abbreviated or coded according to Government Printing Office standards. Other geographic names are not abbreviated in sentence context except that "Mount" and "Saint(e)" may be abbreviated as "Mt." and "St(e)." On maps and other illustrations, the generic part of a name and also a few modifiers may be abbreviated ("Middle," "North," "South," "East," "West," "Left," "Right," "Saint," or "Sainte"), but if space is available, it is preferable to spell them completely.

Except in a few cases approved by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, numbers in names should be spelled. Arabic numerals are number symbols, not words.

Fortynine and One Half Creek
Fourmile Run

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CAPITALIZATION OF GEOGRAPHIC NAMES

With some exceptions approved by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, most words considered part of a proper geographic name are capitalized, including all adjectives, common nouns, and the definite article.

<i>Adams Apple</i>	<i>Little Captain Island</i>
<i>Alva B. Adams Tunnel</i>	<i>Los Canos</i>
<i>Big Hill</i>	<i>Old Fundamental Church</i>
<i>Big Hole Basin</i>	<i>Pee Dee Ditch</i>
<i>Cuchilla Buena Vista</i>	<i>The Crooked Esses</i>
<i>Dark Hollow Brook</i>	<i>The Hogback</i>
<i>Farm River Gut</i>	<i>Upper Sulphur Creek</i>
<i>Lac Arnois</i>	<i>West Side Pond</i>

Exceptions to the rule of capitalization include articles and prepositions within multiple-word names.

<i>Alto de la Cruz</i>	<i>Posta de Roque</i>
<i>Canada de Ojo del Agua</i>	<i>Red River of the North</i>
<i>Fond du Lac</i>	<i>Rock of Ages</i>
<i>Gap in Knob</i>	<i>Scarce of Fat Ridge</i>
<i>Lake of the Ozarks</i>	<i>Spread Eagle Chain of Lakes</i>

As noted earlier, when the generic part of a name is purposely omitted, as in "the Potomac," "the Mojave," and "the Atlantic," the definite article preceding the specific name is not capitalized. Proper names of geographic entities such as regions, political divisions, populated places, localities, and physical features are capitalized in both the singular and plural.

<i>Allegheny Front</i>	<i>Half Dome</i>
<i>Andromeda Cone</i>	<i>High Plains</i>
<i>Atlantic Coastal Plain</i>	<i>Isle of Pines</i>

<i>Bighorn Basin</i>	<i>Lower Town Landing</i>
<i>Blue Ridge</i>	<i>Middle Atlantic States</i>
<i>Brady Soil</i>	<i>Monarch Geyser</i>
<i>Canal Zone</i>	<i>Mount Rainier</i>
<i>Central States</i>	<i>Niagara Falls</i>
<i>Catahoula Parish</i>	<i>North Atlantic States</i>
<i>Colorado Plateau</i>	<i>North Slope</i>
<i>Colville Guide Meridian</i>	<i>Pacific Coast States</i>
<i>Continental Divide</i>	<i>Pine Ridge Reservation</i>
<i>Dennison Township</i>	<i>Potomac and James Rivers</i>
<i>Driftless Area</i>	<i>St. Stephens Base Line</i>
<i>Eastern Shore</i>	<i>Second Principal Meridian</i>
<i>Fall Line</i>	<i>Skyline Drive</i>
<i>Fall Zone</i>	<i>The Chute</i>
<i>Far East (Asia)</i>	<i>The South</i>
<i>Front Range</i>	<i>Tidal Basin</i>
<i>Great Lakes</i>	<i>Upper Peninsula</i>
<i>Gulf Coast</i>	<i>Washington Metropolitan Area</i>
	<i>West Coast</i>

Qualifying words used in a general sense for parts of named areas are not capitalized. Care should be taken to prevent misunderstanding; for example, "western Virginia" or "the western part of Virginia" is preferable to "west Virginia." In borderline cases, however, local residents and news media may consistently use a qualifying word to modify the meaning of an existing geographic name in order to refer to a part of a State or other area. The modifying word then may become part of the proper name, to be uniformly capitalized with the remainder of the name.

<i>East Tennessee</i>	<i>Northern Virginia</i>
<i>Greater New York (city)</i>	<i>South Pacific (Ocean)</i>
<i>New England</i>	<i>Upstate New York</i>
<i>North Atlantic (Ocean)</i>	<i>Southern California</i>

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APPENDIX A.--Public Law 242

[Public Law 242--80th Congress]
[Chapter 330--1st Session]
[S. 1262]

AN ACT

To provide a central authority for standardizing geographic names for the purpose of eliminating duplication in standardizing names among the Federal departments, and for other purposes.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the Secretary of the Interior, hereinafter called the Secretary, conjointly with the Board on Geographic Names, as hereinafter provided, shall provide for uniformity in geographic nomenclature and orthography throughout the Federal Government. The Secretary may exercise his functions through such officials as he may designate, except that such authority as relates to the final approval or review of actions of the Board on Geographic Names shall be exercised by him, or his Under or Assistant Secretaries.

sec. 2. There is hereby established a Board on Geographic Names, hereinafter called the Board. The membership of the Board shall include one representative from each of the Departments of State, War, Navy, Post Office, Interior, Agriculture, and Commerce, and from the Government Printing Office, and the Library of Congress. The Board may also include representatives from such Federal agencies as the Secretary, upon recommendation of the Board, shall from time to time find desirable, even though these agencies are in the departments otherwise represented on the Board. The members of the Board shall be appointed by the respective heads of the departments or independent agencies that they represent. Each member shall be appointed for a two-year term but may be reappointed to successive terms. The members of the Board shall serve without additional compensation. The Board shall nominate a Chairman to be appointed by the Secretary, and shall establish such working committees as are found desirable.

sec. 3. The Board, subject to the approval of the Secretary, shall formulate principles, policies, and procedures to be followed with reference to both domestic and foreign geographic names; and shall decide the standard names and their orthography for official use. The principles, policies, and procedures formulated hereunder shall be designed to serve the interests of the Federal Government and the general public to enlist the effective cooperation of the Federal departments and agencies most concerned, and to give full consideration to the specific interests of particular Federal and State agencies. Action may be taken by the Secretary in any matter wherein the Board does not act within a reasonable time. The Board may make such recommendations to the Secretary as it finds appropriate in connection with this Act.

sec. 4. The Secretary shall cause such studies and investigations to be made and such records to be kept as may be necessary or desirable in carrying out the purposes of this Act, and he shall provide a place of meeting and staff assistance to the Board. The staff shall be responsible to the Secretary, who shall prescribe its relations to the Board and the committees of the Board. The Secretary may establish from time to time, upon recommendation of the Board, advisory committees of United States citizens who are recognized experts in their respective fields to assist in the solution of special problems arising under this Act.

sec. 5. For the guidance of the Federal Government, the Secretary shall promulgate in the name of the Board, from time to time and in such form as will carry out the purposes of this Act, decisions with respect to geographic names and principles of geographic nomenclature and orthography. The Secretary shall also furnish such additional information with respect to geographic names as will assist in carrying out the purposes of this Act.

sec. 6. With respect to geographic names the pertinent decisions and principles issued by the Secretary shall be standard for all material published by the Federal Government. The United States Board on Geographic Names in the Department of the Interior created by Executive order, is hereby abolished, and the duties of said Board are transferred to the Board herein created, and all departments, bureaus, and agencies of the Federal Government shall refer all geographic names and problems to the said Board for the purpose of eliminating duplication of work, personnel, and authority.

sec. 7. Nothing in this Act shall be construed as applying to the naming of the offices or establishments of any Federal agency.

sec. 8. There are hereby authorized to be appropriated such sums as may be necessary to carry out the purposes of this Act.

Approved July 25, 1947.

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APPENDIX B.--Terms and Definitions

Decision

Result of an act by means of which a domestic geographic name in controversy regarding its form or application is made official by the Board on Geographic Names or its Domestic Names Committee after review of case information developed by indepth staff investigation of the name and (or) its application.

Decision Description

Published information given for each domestic geographic name decision that describes the nature and location of the named geographic entity, and in some cases, the origin or meaning of the name.

Domestic Geographic Name

The proper name of a geographic entity in the United States, its territories, and outlying areas.

Geographic Name

A name applied to a geographic feature. It is the proper name, specific term, or expression by which a particular geographic entity is, or was, known. A geographic entity is any relatively permanent part of the natural or manmade landscape or seascape that has recognizable identity within a particular cultural context. A geographic name, then, may refer to any place, feature, or area on the Earth's surface, or to a related group of similar places, features, or areas.

Guideline(s)

Information provided to assist in understanding a principle, policy, or procedure.

Official Name

A geographic name, and its written form and application, approved or recognized as official by the Board for use throughout the Federal Government. An official name is established either by policy or decision of the Board on Geographic Names.

Placename

Same as Geographic Name.

Policy

A statement of regulation(s) relating to particular toponymic circumstances; used to guide and determine present and future decisions.

Principle

A fundamental doctrine that applies to all toponymic conditions that fall under its purview; used to guide and determine present and future decisions.

Procedure(s)

A set of instructions outlining steps to accomplish a particular goal, such as submitting name proposals to the Board on Geographic Names or the application of geographic names to Federal maps, charts, and other publications.

Revised Decision

Result of an action of the Board on Geographic Names or its Domestic Names Committee to revise the selection, form, or spelling of a former decision.

Revised Description

Result of an action of the Board on Geographic Names or its Domestic Names Committee to revise the selection, form, or spelling of a former decision.

Statutory Name

A name made official by an act of the U.S. Congress.

Toponymy (Toponymic)

The study of or a reference to geographic names.

Unofficial Name

A geographic name not formally recognized as official by the Board on Geographic Names.

Vacated Decision

Result of an action of the Board on Geographic Names or the Domestic Names Committee to formally annul a former decision, such as when the named feature no longer exists or when it cannot be identified.

Variant Name

A name or spelling, once or currently used to refer to a particular geographic entity, other than the official name.

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APPENDIX C.--Domestic Geographic Name Report



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APPENDIX D.--Foreign Geographic Names

FOREIGN NAMES COMMITTEE

Foreign names are processed by the Foreign Names Committee of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, which is supported by an Executive Secretary and staff furnished by the [National Imagery and Mapping Agency](#), U.S. Department of Defense. The basic policy for determining standard names in foreign countries that use the Roman alphabet is to accept as official the written forms of names recognized locally. Names in countries that do not use the Roman alphabet are converted (romanized) according to systems approved by the Board. The Board cooperates wherever possible with foreign governments to standardize foreign names for official U.S. purposes.

DIACRITICAL MARKS

Diacritical marks and special characters are essential to the spelling of foreign names. These characters, such as the [tilde](#), [dieresis or umlaut](#), [barred o](#), [macron](#), [cedilla](#), [right hook](#), [grave](#), [acute](#), [circumflex](#), [superior dot](#), and others, should be used as specified by the Board on Geographic Names.

CONVENTIONAL NAMES

For names of foreign countries, for features common to two or more countries having different languages, and for a few populated areas and natural features in foreign countries, the Board has also approved optional use of names that are traditional (conventional) with English-speaking nations, for example, "Italy (Italia)," "Munich (München)," "Jordan River (Mahr al Urdunn)," "Pyrenees (Pirineos, Pyrénées)."

FOREIGN GAZETTEERS AND OTHER PUBLICATIONS

The official standard forms of foreign names have been published by the Board in more than 150 gazetteers. Copies are on file at the Geological Survey libraries in Reston, Va.; Denver, Colo.; and Menlo Park, Calif., and also in more than 600 Federal, State, university, and local libraries. These gazetteers, as well as other publications, including a "Romanization Systems and Roman-Script Spelling Conventions," may be purchased from USGS Information Services, Box 25286, Denver, CO 80225.

APPENDIX E.-- International Standardization

HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL STANDARDIZATION

Expansion of international activities in the 19th century was accompanied by a growing realization that various forms of communication and documentation relied on standard geographic references for accuracy. Geographic names had to be continually printed, copied, telegraphed, and written on maps and charts. Languages of the world, however, are recorded in different scripts. The number of speech sounds, and the number of ways of uttering and modifying them, is so large that no language contains them all, no person can use them all, and no traditional system of writing can represent them all.

The First International Geographical Congress held in Antwerp in 1871 was the springboard for an effort to achieve worldwide uniformity in geographic names. This was followed in 1875 by the Universal Postal Union's decision to adopt the Roman alphabet for writing post office names. In 1909, the International Map Committee set the standard for name usage to be applied on the International Map of the World series.

UNITED NATIONS EFFORTS

Current efforts to standardize geographic names for international use are mainly associated with the work of the United Nations. That organization was, and is, considered by most to be the logical place to coordinate and encourage international name standardization. In 1958, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations passed a resolution requesting the Secretary General to draft a plan for achieving international uniformity. United Nations activities include sponsoring conferences and sessions of a group of experts in the interest of developing guiding principles for attaining uniformity in the name-processing procedures and in the promotion of national standardization by all countries.

PAN AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY (PAIGH)

The Board sponsors a yearly, 2-week course in applied toponymy offered under the auspices of the Pan American Institute of Geography and History, whose aims, among others, are to encourage, promote, and disseminate scientific studies of interest to the Americas in the disciplines of cartography, geophysics, geography, and history. This course provides a basis for the implementation by participating nations of programs for national standardization of geographic names and includes instruction modules for fieldwork and automated data processing.

| [GNIS Home Page](#) | [Board of Geographic Names](#) | [Mapping Information](#) |

[U.S. Department of the Interior](#) | [U.S. Geological Survey](#)

523 National Center, Reston, VA 20192, USA

URL: <http://geonames.usgs.gov/pppdgn.html>

Maintainer: [GNIS Manager](#)

Last modified: 12:56:30 Wed 21 Mar 2001

[USGS Privacy Policy and Disclaimers](#)

APPENDIX C.

U.S. Department of the Interior
U.S. Geological Survey

Domestic Geographic
Name Report

1. Use this form to recommend a feature name or to suggest a name change.

2. For features on Federal lands, coordinate requests with the agency (U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, etc.) for the administrative area in which the feature is located.
3. On the reverse side of this form give information on the local usage and authority for recommended name.

4. For more information about the Geographic Names Information System or the National Gazetteer program, contact the U.S. Board on Geographic Names at 703-648-4544.
5. Return this form to:

Executive Secretary for Domestic
Geographic Names
U.S. Geological Survey
523 National Center
Reston, VA 20192

Action Requested:	Recommended Name
Proposed New Name	State
Application Change	County or Equivalent
Name Change	Administrative Area
Other	

Specific Area Covered:

Latitude: ____° ____' ____" N S

Longitude: ____° ____' ____" W E

Mouth End Center

Latitude: ____° ____' ____" N S

Longitude: ____° ____' ____" W E

Heading End

Section(s) _____

Township(s) _____

Range(s) _____

Meridian _____

Elevation ____ ft./m.

Type of Feature (stream, mountain, populated place, etc.): _____

Is the feature identified (including other names) in the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS)?
Yes No Unknown If yes, please indicate how it is listed: _____

Description of Feature (physical shape, length, width, direction of flow, etc.): _____

Maps and Other Sources Using <i>Recommended</i> Name (include scale and date)	Other Names (variants)	Maps and Other Sources Using Other Name or Applications (include scale and date)

Name Information (such as origin, meaning of the recommended name, historical significance, biographical data (if commemorative), nature of usage or application, or any other pertinent information):

Is the recommended name in local usage? Yes No If yes, for approximately how many years? _____

Is there local opposition to, or conflict, with the recommended name? Yes No (If yes, explain)

For proposed new name, please provide evidence that feature is unnamed:

Additional information:

Copy Submitted By (name):		Title	Telephone (day)	Date
Company or Agency		Address (City, State, and ZIPCode)		
Copy Prepared By (if other than above):		Title	Phone (day)	Date
Company or Agency		Address (City, State, and ZIPCode)		
Authority for Recommended Name	Mailing Address and Telephone	Occupation	Years in Area	